

Hiding in the wings, a new

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THE company picked to carry out the Barangaroo redevelopment has a second development proposal ready in case its current controversial plan is rejected by the NSW Government.

The chief executive of the Barangaroo Delivery Authority, John Tabart, said Lend Lease had "two sets of financials": one for a complying scheme and the other for the preferred, non-complying scheme.

To date, the only details publicly released are for the non-complying scheme which includes a proposal for a development of almost 500,000 sq m, 15 per cent over existing limits, and a 150-metre pier built over the water on which a 60-storey five-star hotel is proposed.

Before the non-complying elements of the preferred scheme, such as the hotel, can proceed, the concept plan for Barangaroo will have to be modified to permit them.

A statement released this week by the Premier, Kristina Keneally,

'Of course [the wharf is] not genuine public space.'

Philip Cox, architect

said "most elements of the Lend Lease plan fit within the requirements of the ... concept plan", although critics, including the architect Philip Thalys, who led a team that won the original design competition for the site, said "most" elements of preferred proposal appear to breach the plan.

So far the authority has not listed which elements of the preferred scheme comply and which ones do not.

A Lend Lease spokesman confirmed it had alternatives to each of the non-complying elements of its preferred scheme, including relocating the hotel onto Hickson Road, where it would no longer be the centrepiece of the development and would instead be a three- or four-star hotel.

The preferred scheme designed by the eminent British architect Lord Richard Rogers's firm, has been praised as "magnificent" by Ms Keneally and championed by the former prime minister Paul Keating, who said the wharf will help "articulate" the "dull as dish-water" existing straight shoreline

and increase public access to the harbour.

But criticism of the plan appears to be building. The well-known Sydney architect Philip Cox said he strongly supported Barangaroo's redevelopment, but said it should not be allowed on the water and the proposed pier could never be public space once there was a hotel on it.

"Of course not, it's not genuine public space," he said.

"You only have to analyse the requirements of a hotel with fire services, taxis and bus drop-offs and service vehicle deliveries ... it's hardly public domain."

Putting a hotel on the wharf "sterilises the very finger into the harbour which is stated as public domain", he said.

While the height and placement of the hotel in the water have prompted criticism on mainly aesthetic grounds, the plan to build halfway across the bay has also worried boat operators in Darling Harbour who say it will narrow the bay's entrance to just 150 metres.

With three new ferry wharves just south of the pier planned to bring visitors to the site, boat operators claim there will not be enough room for the vessels to back out and turn around.

The managing director of Captain Cook Cruises in Sydney Harbour, Anthony Haworth, warned his company would be very concerned about anything that affected safe navigation and "building into an already congested waterway would not enhance safe navigation".

While the preferred proposal does not comply with the concept plan, the unsuccessful proposal by another famous British architect, Sir Norman Foster, does appear to comply.

Elements of the scheme, submitted by Brookfield Multiplex, were put on display this week by the authority at an exhibition at the Old Port Building off Hickson Rd that opens on Wednesdays and Saturdays for a month.

A spokeswoman for Brookfield Multiplex said it could not discuss any of the design ideas because they were bound by confidentiality agreements with the authority that were still in place.

The Foster plan does not intrude into the water and locates the commercial buildings back behind a road which runs parallel to the public foreshore in keeping with one of the fundamental elements of the original Thalys design for the site.

► **Letters** - News Review, Page 8



Going where many cities before have failed ... artists' impressions of

Now for the hard part

IF ARCHITECTURE were like Olympic snowboarding, and each trick rated on its degree of difficulty, what Lend Lease and Richard Rogers are attempting at Barangaroo would approach a perfect 10.

Making a new high-rise office park isn't hard. Erecting towers, aligning levels, ensuring the water and sewage don't run into the telecoms - that's like falling off a log. Even the architecture, getting the skyscrapers to sing, is by comparison a breeze.

What is being attempted here - if we accept the rhetoric - is the from-scratch creation of a genuine, pulsing city precinct that knits seamlessly to the existing and convinces us all by its sheer weight and presence that, in the words of Lend Lease's David Hutton, it's where "real buildings hit real streets". This is hard. So hard, in fact,



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that to my knowledge it's never been done.

The attempts fall into two camps. There are those that (like Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, Barcelona's Barceloneta or London's Barbican) try to recreate the warmth and solidity of an old city in an entirely contemporary language. And there are those that (like London's Paternoster Square) react to the failure of such schemes by aping the forms of history. All of them start with high hopes and, so far, all of them fail.

Sydney's most spectacular failure is Darling Harbour,

plan for Barangaroo



Now some of the public spaces - the canal, Hickson Road (top right) and the hotel-on-a-pier - in the winning Barangaroo scheme might look.

art: public spaces of quality not quantity

which cold-shoulders the city with dead-face buildings, encircling motorways and severed street connections. But even there, at the time, its big, driving rhetoric was populism.

Why so hard? Why does contemporary urbanism find it impossible to recapture what seemed so easy not just for traditional villages but also 19th and early 20th century cities? Midtown Manhattan wasn't built for civic pride. It was built by commerce, for commerce; public input, zip. So, why?

The answer, simply, is economic rationalism. The user-pays era, far from undoing modernism's disdain for all things public, reinforced it (while pretending otherwise). Darling Harbour was killed by the dead hand of Laurie Brereton and the NSW Right. So it is especially notable that Baranagaroo is

being so intensively driven by our arch econo-rat, Brereton's old mate Paul Keating, cloaked these days in naturism and historicism. And ironic, since this is public land, that we the public - users-to-be who have already paid, and handsomely - must fight again to be included in the process and respected by the product.

All players here talk of making it work for the public; not least because a commercial precinct without humans is a commercial fail. They cite London's Canary Wharf as such a failure. But when pressed they answer with quantity of public space, not quality. So, will they do what it takes? More importantly, can they?

What it takes is a mindset inversion: real generosity towards the public realm and the unfeigned perception of public space as primary, served

and embellished by the buildings that shape it (rather than vice versa).

This is inimical to a world run by bean-counters, box-tickers and bottom-line shareholders. And made harder by the fact that, while the rhetoric is in place, the track record is not.

Rogers has produced many masterplans (mostly unbuilt) but his global fame rests on buildings. Pompidou in Paris, Renault in Swindon and in London, Lloyds, the Millennium Dome and Heathrow Terminal Five. Remarkable buildings all but united in their disdain for public space. Barangaroo Delivery Authority head John Tabart comes from the Federal Airports Corporation and Melbourne Docklands - of which, ditto. Richard Johnson, now running Barangaroo north, gave us the space outside

Westpac, and Canberra's portrait gallery.

So it's down to Paul, who presents himself as if he, landed like some kind of winged victory, were "the public" personified. The process, Keating insists, is public because he is involved. And when he describes Rogers' red hotel as a "Colossus of Rhodes" you can't help feeling it's himself he sees, glorious astride the harbour.

Yet Barangaroo herself, supine beneath this daisy-chain of pocket-pissers, still reads as the modernist dream; a series of buildings plonked in space, rather than a series of fabulous spaces defined by their buildings.

Until they can reverse this mindset, I'll remain sceptical as to whether these old guys can change their spots, even if they want to.